

# The Region

*'We've got to wake up and realize the mess we are in.'*

Lee Ann Garcia, Grand Terrace mayor, reacting to a quality-of-life study

## Good Vibes Overcome Bad News

Despite the region's low marks in mobility, air quality, education, income, employment, housing and safety, people keep coming.

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Why on earth would anyone want to live here?

In the six-county region surrounding Los Angeles, traffic is the worst in the nation, jobs are tough to come by, a home costs a fortune, the public schools are largely a shambles and the air, after a short spell of getting cleaner, is smogging up again.

"We're in a crisis situation," said Grand Terrace Mayor Lee Ann Garcia, one of a handful of local politicians who unveiled a study Thursday on the quality of life in Los Angeles, Orange, Ventura, San Bernardino, Riverside and Imperial counties. "We've got to wake up and

realize the mess we are in."

For proof, Garcia pointed to a report card accompanying the annual assessment by the Southern California Assn. of Governments, or SCAG, which has judged the region since 1998 in seven categories: employment, income, housing, mobility, air quality, education and safety.

Drawn mostly from data SCAG compiled in 2002, the report card describes an L.A. area that is rapidly adding poorly schooled residents and providing them with jobs that pay badly, a region of ever-increasing rents, perpetually clogged freeways and little elbow room. Roughly one of every 17 people in the United States lives here.

In short, the region is a mess.

"I wouldn't want to take this report card home to my mother," said Santa Monica Councilwoman Pam O'Connor. "I don't know how I'd break the news."

Just getting around is a huge hurdle, a factor that led SCAG to give its lowest grade,

a D-minus, in mobility.

Traffic in the six-county region remained the nation's worst, with people spending an average of 50 hours a year stuck in traffic. What's more, the use of mass transit stayed low, carpooling declined and highway fatalities were higher than the national urban average.

Transportation wasn't the only category near complete failure. The report card gave education a D, noting that eighth-graders in every county but Orange and Ventura scored below the national median in standardized math and reading tests.

In all counties, fewer than 40% of high school graduates finished courses required for admission to the state's university system, and the region ranked last among the nation's largest urban regions for the percentage of adults with at least high school diplomas.

Housing received a D-plus, largely because the costs of buying and renting continue to rise, the report said. The number of building permits soared

to the highest level since 1990, but housing affordability fell compared with levels in the rest of the nation, a trend that began in 1997. Only a third of the region's residents could afford median-priced houses in 2002. Elsewhere, half the residents could afford them.

Rating only slightly better were air quality and personal income, which received grades of C and C-minus, respectively. Typifying the pollution problem was an area including Orange County and southern Los Angeles County, where the ozone measurement in the air failed to meet federal standards on 49 days in 2002, up from 36 days the previous year.

Incomes fell along with employment in a region that lost 22,000 jobs in 2002, according to the report. One sliver of good news: With the influx of people, the number working in retail has increased. But that was said to underscore more trouble: Retail jobs tend to pay less than work in manufacturing and construction.

The struggling state of the region has economists and

government planners struggling to offer solutions.

Jack Kyser, senior economist for the L.A. Economic Development Corp., a nonprofit business group, said top officials must think more creatively and not reach for simple "sound-bite solutions."

Riverside Mayor Ron Loveridge, who oversaw the SCAG study, echoed those sentiments, stating that the region needs to embrace "big concepts," like the construction of a high-speed train system that could push the economy by creating jobs, and improve traffic and air quality.

Loveridge was downcast as he studied the report, noting that it was full of "terrible news." But he saw a silver lining. The region continues to grow, adding about 330,000 people, to push the population to 17.4 million in 2002.

"It's the California dream," Loveridge said. "The excitement we have here. The weather. We've got all of these problems but people still want to live here because of that dream."